

THE GREAT FLOUR riot OF 1837.

Rents, provisions, fuel, food, money, were now absorbing the attention of all classes. In the very houses of Heaven men fought hereafter, in dwelling upon the dearest important matters of the present moment.

On the 1st of February, 1837, a general combination of all the speculators, capitalists and land owners, against the poor, the needy, the laborer, and the thousands of the poor, who were suffering from speculation, is leagued with speculators, against tenants. They are opening stores in all directions. The only recourse was the value of houses, and drive tenants from the city.

The foregoing extracts are taken from the *New York Herald* of February 7, 1837, and may be regarded as a graphic and life like sketch of the condition of our city during that disastrous year. There

like results. Heaven forbid, however, that we should ever be compelled to pass through such another ordeal, or that speculators, careless as some of them are, should be induced by the necessities of the times to engage in the same system of extortion which distinguished the year to which we refer as an era in the history of the good old Knickerbocker city.

At the time to which we allude, the exciting and all-absorbing topics were the high rents and exorbitant prices of provisions. They formed the principal subjects of discussion, and apprehensions were entertained by the wise and far-seeing that the peace of the city would be endangered if an immediate remedy was not found. On the evening of the 10th of February, a notice was published in our paper to the effect that preparations were making for the

great meeting of the people in the Park, to take into consideration the present state of things. The people were in a very good mood, and it was believed that the landlords were less likely to increase their rents, and that the speculators had taken advantage of a deficiency in the wheat crop of the previous harvest to raise the price of flour throughout the country. This speculation was not confirmed, and the meeting but extended to Maine, Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania, where public meetings had been held to protest against the outrage. The necessity, therefore, of a general meeting was not felt, and it was more apparent every day; but, as it was desirable that the meeting should be composed of all classes of citizens, laborers, mechanics, and men of property, it was decided, without exception, that the meeting should be held in the city. It was hoped that an assemblage of this kind would be productive of good effects, and that some plan of action might be adopted that would remove the grievances of which the great body of the people were complaining. The following is the editorial article, published on the morning of the day for which the meeting had been called, the *HERALD* gave the following judicious advice, which, if followed, would have prevented the disgraceful riot that ensued:-

We trust, therefore, that this meeting may be conducted with order, decorum and intelligence throughout. Reason, knowledge and common sense be the guide. It is not the province of a mob to do mischief. It is a question of life against death—of hunger and cold against avarice and usury—of common sense against passion. Let the people be guided by their representatives, labor, politician and extortioner. Let every measure and

It was doubtless a matter of subsequent regret that this wise counsel was not followed, and that the wild violence to which the city appeared to have abandoned itself, was not restrained by a regard for the rights of personal property, or a reckless and prodigal waste of one of the great necessities of life. The riotousness continued until immediately in front of the City Hall, at four o'clock. The day was the most inclement of the season, the wind was piercing cold, and had the subject been one only of ordinary interest, very few would have attended. But the subject was of general and vital importance, and the excitement of the day was wild in the limits of the Park was assembled on this momentous occasion. There were about twenty-five thousand persons present, among whom were a large representation from all classes and conditions of life, from the poor tradesman who builds the lordly mansion, to the noblest of the nobles, and the most illustrious and exalted of the dignitaries.

of the meeting, in relation to the existing monopolies, were presented and made, and there appeared to be but one feeling in regard to the speculators—namely, that they should be destroyed. The meeting did not content with the peaceable and orderly mode of proceeding which had been adopted, and unable to restrain their excitement, formed in a body, and went to the Washington street, near the market, and commenced the destruction of the store on the extensive store of Eli Hart & Co., who had rendered themselves particularly obnoxious by their speculation in flour, and the high price which they had demanded for it. The mob, consisting of men broke into the building, smashed the windows, overturned every thing within their reach, and, seizing about a hundred barrels, smashed in the heads, and, with the exception of a few, which were not injured, destroyed by being trampled under foot; but a considerable portion was saved and carried off by children and women, who, taking advantage of the distur-

to the service. The streets for several hundred yards from the ransacked building were strewn with fragments of the pavement, and the cause for that the crowd was too great, and the popular feeling too deeply excited and aroused, to admit of any further effective being done to quell the riot. The Mayor was present, and did all in the power of man to allay the excitement and prevent the people from committing any more acts of violence in that manner. It was not an ordinary mob, composed of the lowest and most degraded of the population, but was formed of respectable mechanics, industrial and hard-working laborers, and men from various professions and occupations. It was not intended not to be put down immediately, when once aroused; and it must be admitted that there were many palliating circumstances which might be urged for what they did, however much we may condemn any movement of this kind, as a violation of the rights of society, or which has a tendency to destroy our confidence in the integrity and administration of our laws. The battle-cry of the masses on this occasion was "No Bread, bread," and "No monopoly," and wherever it was heard it struck terror to the hearts of the speculative monopolists, and the grasping and avaricious, and enraged populace, called on several citizens to assist them in maintaining the supremacy of the laws; but they were prevented from doing so by a feeling of sympathy with the rioters, or from a fear that they

to stay them by their dollars lest he sell the flour at eight dollars a barrel, his dollars less than had been offered before, for he was not to be cheated. However, for nothing but the destruction of the property would appear to satisfy them. "It is too late," they replied, as they flung barrels after barrels into the street. The crowd increased, and the soldiers in front, in February of 1848, sealed the door of Louis Philippe, destroyed the succession in his family, and, if we follow it out to its consequence, placed the prisoner of Ham and "the nephew of his uncle" upon the imperial throne. At this point, the French people were told, which the people complained were temporary, and not deep-seated, as they were in France. It was, therefore, impossible, that they should be attended with the same consequences, or that they could result in anything like the overthrow of the empire. But the wild excitement and violence which prevailed, there were some instances of respect for the laws and the rights of property which redeemed the worst features of the riot. In one instance, a man endeavoring to turn some plunderers from carrying off a wagon load of flour, and were beaten back, when they were assisted by a tall, powerful fellow in a carman's frock. Addressing the crowd, that were prepared to assist him, he said, "I am a poor officer, he called upon them to respect property."

"No plunder, my lads!" said he; "no plunder—destroy, destroy, as much as you please. Teach these monopolists that we know our rights, and will defend them! We have taken down the guillotine. What the crowd had wreaked their vengeance upon the flour store, they gradually dispersed, and the scene of destruction was left entirely in the occupation of a large number of men, who were busy in erecting a large barrier to prevent the recurrence of a similar

strage. By eight o'clock that evening all was quiet, and only the remains of the scattered flour, mingled with the dust of the streets, and the ruined building, gave evidence of the violence that had been done. Special squads were detailed from the police to protect some establishments in Broad street; but there was, fortunately, very little occasion for their services, as the people were satisfied with what they had already done. The military were also called out, but they were quartered in the side streets, returned to their quarters without firing a shot.

The damage done in other parts of the city was comparatively trifling in extent. In Broad street, the rioters had broken up the flour store; but here the rioters were content with smashing one or two panes of glass, knocking the heads out of a few barrels of flour, and scattering their contents in the street. Herrick's store, at Cornhill slip, was broken up, but the rioters were content with the flour destroyed in the same manner. During the riot about thirty persons were arrested, and such were the apprehensions of the police authorities, that in every case they refused bail, no matter how unexceptionable the character of the rioters, to let them out until their cases could be investigated. To such friends as applied for their discharge, on procuring bail, the only answer was—"No bail can be taken; we have not yet decided what to do." Some of the rioters were charged with breaking into the flour stores, and others on a charge of appropriating the flour to their own use. After a trial, in the course of which it appeared that more than one-half of the prisoners were innocent of the charges preferred against them, one was sentenced to six months imprisonment and another to four months in the City